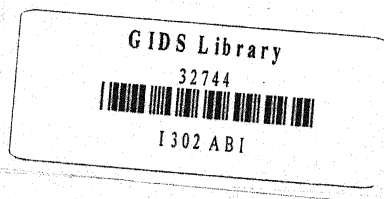# TOWARD A THEORY OF ROLE CONFLICT :

A NEW PARADIGM

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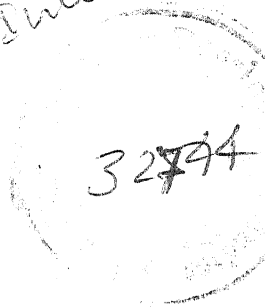### LUCKNOW 226 024

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TOWARD A THEORY OF ROLE CONFLICT:
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situations. Each situation is demanding, permitting, prescribing and expecting certain behaviour patterns from individuals. Although, individuals in the process of socialization, prepare themselves to perform the two sets of behaviour patterns (the conduct of persons toward their expectations, duties and obligations of a role). Yet they are exposed to incompatible situations due to heavy pressure, non-conformity inadequacy of role-partners and ambivalence in normative patterns. The phenomenon 'role-conflict' can not be analyzed in its own identity unless we recognize the role itself.

In sociological literature it has been accepted without much debate[1] that the term "role" has been adopted, from literature, theatric plays, poetry, writings and psychology specially in the interpretation of an individual and personality. Role has a long history of being used and misused in various senses such as persona, person, mask and character. In sociology, the concept of role was employed by sociologists[2] for social relations, social interaction social action and social position. Whatever the social situation may be but there is one nearly common definition emerges from the above discussion that the concept of role pertains to the behaviour of persons by holding particular positions in the society. By behaviour, we mean the conduct of persons towards the expectations, duties and obligations of a role. Now behaviour can not be actualized in vacuum but in relation to another person. For example a mother

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[1] J.L. Moreno (ed.) The Sociometry Reader, Glencoe III : The Free Press, 1960; R.K. Merton, Sociological Ambivalence and others Essays, New York : The Free Press,1976; R. Dahrendorf, Essays in the Theory of Society, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul 1970 ; J.A. Jackson (ed.), Role, Sociological Studies, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press 1972, also see H. Poptiz in J.A. Jackson, Ibid., 1972, B.J. Biddle and E.J. Thomas (eds.) Role-Theory : Concepts and Research, New York : Wiley & sons Inc. 1966; L.J. Neiman and J.W. Hughes, "The Problem of the Concept of role : A Survey of the Literature," Social Forces, Vol. XXX Dec. 1951, pp-141-9.

[2] R.H. Linton, The Study of Man, New York : Appleton, Century, 1936; K. Davis, Human Society, New York : Macmillan, 1949; S.F. Nadel, The Theory of Social Structure, Glencoe III : The Free Press, 1957; A.R. Radcliff Brown, Structure and Functions in Primitive Society, London : Cohen & West, 1952; M. Banton, Roles : An Introduction to the Study of Social Relations London : Tavis Lock, Pub. 1972; L.J. Neiman & J.W. Huges, op.cit. 1951; T. Parsons, The Sociological System, Glencoe III, The Free Press, 1951, and ; R.K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structures, New York : Amerind Publishing, 1968.

actualizes mother role in relation to her child, if there is no child, there is no mother role. In the absence of the child, mother role will loose its recognition in the society. Thus role is a relational term. One plays a role vis-a-vis another person's role, which is linked to a counter position. This kind of relationship is termed as 'role-taking, "the actor takes the role of another in carrying out some behaviour of his own; role-taking is an adjunct to the determination or application of one's role in a given situation." [3] In a given situation taking a role in relation to counter position is termed as ego and alters.[4] Ego's role expectations, duties and obligations are at the same time alter's right whereas alter's own role is ego's right. The reciprocal interaction between ego and alter form a role sector. However what ego in the process of role taking may or may not include adopting the stand point of alter as one's own. Consequently ego's actual conduct may be different from the prescribed behaviour. Ego's actual behaviour is related to the dimension of role – playing. These two factors – role taking and role-playing are the major constituents of role-theory. In role theory the pair has been interpreted in various terms like role perception and role performance, normative aspect and behavioural aspect, expected role and actual role, role making and role enactment etc. However in the scientific analysis of role-theory they serve only to differentiate the normative patterns of behaviour of persons from their actual patterns of behaviour.

Theory of role-Conflict

Theory of role-conflict is unfortunately a neglected area of sociological enquiry . This may be due to the fact that the general theory of conflict lays heavy emphasis on social conflict, racial and ethnic tensions, religious and cultural tensions, class conflict,

[3] R.H.Turner,"Role -Taking, Role Stand Point and Reference Group Behaviour," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 61, 1956, pp-316-28

[4] T. Parsons, The Social System, Glencoe III The Free Press, 1951, p-70.

student unrest, strikes, protests etc. As a result the problem of role conflict is side lined. In this sense role conflict is different from social conflict; but there is one nearly universal denominator of units and parts that it is understood as clash, disruption and hindrance between normal function of these units and parts.

Social conflict theory often has its attention on larger issues such as inter- relationship between two groups, institutions and classes whereas role-conflict theory tends to be specific, restricted and limited to the inter-relations between two members of an organization or two persons of a group, family or even an individual and her/his positions in the family and society. Role-conflict is associated with roles and it inevitably goes on within the role-system.

Studies on the role-conflict are dismally inadequate yet an attempt has been made to highlight some of the theoretical inputs of sociologists who not only recognized the problem but postulated a theory on role-conflict. The first study of role-conflict is perhaps that of parsons. He applied the term role conflict in relation to a man (between his boss and wife) assuming a man has an instrumental role and woman as an expressive role in the family. To quote him "role conflict is the exposure of the actor to conflicting sets of legitimized role expectations that complete fulfillment of both is realistically impossible."[5]

Parsons in his patterns variables namely effectively — neutrality, specificity — diffuseness, universalistic and particularistic discussed the uncertainty of roles. The role-conflict begins with the difficulty of living up both expectations at one time. When it lies between "well defined" roles, it is the ego's priority to a particular expectation but when the difficulty comes into the role due to its own inadequacies, it is uncertainty of roles. These may be due to the pressure, conformity and sanctions.

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[5] T, Parsons, Op.cit., p.280.

(I)   Pressure

In the reciprocity of ego-alter system, a pressure may be exerted by alter or counter position or from the role senders (ego's motives). Thus ego may bend its actions more to one side than to the other side. This may also be impelled by a group as a value system. In this context, one example may be of some interest. In our Indian society, mothers not only love their children but care for them without bothering about their own comforts. They take care of primary needs, bake the cake heal the wound and balm the pain in the chilly winters, sunny summers, foggy mornings and stormy nights. This type of dedication naturally provides a close tie between mothers and children. In response to this type of affection, children express their love, hatred, fears, ambitions, desires and pangs. But on the one hand, mothers want their children to follow the pattern laid down for them and do not want a "deviation" from that, while on the other children do not want to obey and follow it. Often mother do not want a counter argument from their children, but submissiveness and obedience. This kind of pressure we can see in many ways in many families in our daily life.

(II)   Conformity

Parsons's suggested term "theorem of institutional integration" refers to conformity that is necessary for the maintenance of the society. It rests on the desire of individuals to do things, which must be done if the society is to survive.[6] In a normal situation, people want to do what they are supposed to do in accordance with a larger social structure. But find it difficult most of the time because of conformity problem, The conformity can be put forth in four criteria:

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[6] T. Parsons, Ibid, pp.36-43.

(a) **Conformity to expectations:** The difficulty may be examined with the help of Parsons's own variable universalistic and particularistic. Our cultural ethos is "all are brothers and sisters (universal)." At the same time, "we should associate with people who are winners, virtuous, literate and gentle (particularistic)." Now let us think of a child who is punished, abused and beaten up for mixing up with those whom no one wants to be associated. Thus, the difficulty lies in conforming to the expectations, which may be imaginative and abstract and do not fit into action.

(b) **Conformity to Norms :** All norms are patterned and generalized and therefore become "abstract." The abstraction of norms poses a problem of interpretation, which, in turn, is a great problem in itself. This leads to role conflict.

(c) **Specification of Expectations :** This concerns the distribution of activities between occasions. For example, one particular type of behaviour is permitted on a particular occasion but not to be tolerated in other places. This is true of all types of behaviour: food, clothings, socializing and intimate relationships.

(d) **Adequate Performance :** There is no measurement of adequacy or perfection. Parsons himself felt sorry for using vague formula as "doing your best", making the most of your opportunities and resources.[7] In such a situation, one person becomes more ambitious while other may not. One might say "how much or why should I do"? Some people look forward to every new day while others describe "sour grapes" and curse their misfortune.

(iii) Sanctions

Sanctions are attached to the internalization of the normative pattern, which alter enforces on ego's situation of actions in the reciprocal interaction system. Alter "confirms" ego's feeling that its actions are "right" and manifest the "proper attitudes" or serve as a warning that they are "wrong" and alter expects ego to "mend his ways." This is a control mechanism but on the other hand, when ego finds its actions wrong, it dives into conflict.

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[7] Ibid., pp.36-43.

Parsons's attempt to define uncertainty of roles due to pressure, conformity and sanctions, seems to be fixed in a box of electric gadgets. He believed conflict to be inherent in the system and it could be understood as "come and go" without causing the system to break down. He, in his functionalist approach, has well knitted a network of ego-alter interaction system, which is the major basis of role conflict, However, conflict is manifested by other systems as well.

Parsons adopted a rigid line of thinking and did not care for the inequalities of status and power, the variety of role-relationships or the people endowed with different set of characteristics (personality structure and social background). Merton, though following Parsons's line of thinking, is clearly distinct from Parsons in his efforts. He seems to be influenced by the conflict theorists. On the parallel, he suggested in a role-set, the role-partners are drawn from diverse social statuses with to some degree correspondingly different social values in their statuses and roles. Such behaviour serves to cusion and disturbance of a role-set involving conflict expectations of the behaviour of those accepting a particular status. He also suggested the sources of role-conflict to be varying degree of intensity of involvement of members in the role-set, coalitions of power among the members of role-set and degree of observability of role behaviour.[8] On the subject of role-conflict, his major work is on role ambivalence.

To begin with, he argued that social role has not been clearly defined. The interpretation of social role has come into real life through three sources: depictive, sociographic and analytical.[9] The depictive accounts of social roles are representational portraits. The particular kind of role as housewife, physician, businessman, leader,

priest and theatric hero etc. are the creation of the "writer" of his time, he experienced in his life in the social relations, and what he may have thought for one and for all.

The second type, sociographic roles also give the image of man and woman but do not place its characters in heavy plots with complex nature rather this type gives a description of daily life in a lighter tone as projecting a streetman or most ordinary man. If we, carefully, relate these two types, it is the case of classic and popular literature.

The third concerned category is of sociologists' "analytical" work. Merton, however, has taken into account only two sociologists, Sorokin and Parsons, and asserted that the characteristics and components are not clearly defined. As he mentioned, neither Sorokin's notion that "role relations" are predominantly of one kind or another, they are seldom purely femilistic or compulsory nor Parsons' "pattern variables", as we have mentioned earlier, necessarily apply to every specific act. Thus, Merton described social role as a dynamic organization of norms and counter norms, and not as combination of dominant attributes (such as effective-neutrality or functional specificity). He proposed that the major norms and the minor counter norms alternatively govern role-behaviour to produce ambivalence.[10] Thus, role ambivalence is referred to as incompatible normative expectations incorporated in a single of a single status......and it is built into the social relation with the same people. Focussing on the ambivalence in role, three types may be put forth. First, the structural aspect of a "particular status "; the second is multiple types of "function", for example, instrumental and expressive or moral, assigned to a status. The third type is related to normative behaviour patterns.[11] Merton gives two examples of role ambivalence. One is of "the role of bureaucrat, when individualized and personal attention is wanted by the client

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[10] R.K. Merton, Ibid., p.17.
[11] Ibid., pp.6-10.

while the bureaucracy requires generalized and impersonal treatment". Another role ambivalence is given by him of physician, "the therapist role of the physician, which calls for both "a degree of affective detachment from the patient and a degree of compassionate concern about him". With these examples, he argued that role ambivalence puts contradictory demands upon the occupants of a status in particular social relation and since these norms cannot be simultaneously expressed in behaviour, they come to be expressed in an oscillation of behaviour: of detachment and compassion, of discipline and permissiveness, of personal and impersonal treatment.[12]

A careful revision of the works of both Parsons & Merton showed that both have placed conflict in between the contradictory situations. The difference lies in the terms not in the moods. Parsons, in the ego-alter interaction system, found two aspects: legitimized role expectations and alienative need deposition, and Merton. In his role-set or role-relations, differentiated between major norms and minor norms. Thus, both stressed on the normative aspects, because legitimized role expectations are also institutionalized. In this sense, they are also normative types.

Merton, however, seems to have gone ahead of Parsons in viewing the status itself as an ambivalence producing element, that it related to the functions assigned to a particular status. He gives example of men's job (instrumental) and women's job (expressive) produce lots of ambivalence in role-relationship occupied by individuals in the social structure.

Goode, takes balanced way of explaining the sources of conflict. He focuses on the different characteristics of people who perceive the same situation differently and respond to them differently. He also blames the "inadequacy of normative pattern",

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[12] ibid., p.8.

because even when "the norms of the society" are fully accepted by the individual, they are not adequate 'guides' for an individual action. Order cannot be imposed by any 'general' solution for all role decisions, since the total set of role obligations is probably unique for every individual.[13]   Goode explains over demanding expectations from persons in a social structure with a basic concern for individuals who face role-strain.

The four-fold argument runs: First, even when role demands are not onerous, difficult, or displeasing, they are required at particular times and places. Consequently, no role demand is such a spontaneous pleasure that conformity with it is always automatic.

Second, all individuals take part in many "different" role relationships for, each of which there will be somewhat different obligations. Among these, there may be either contradictory performance require, or conflicts of time, place or resources.

Third, each role relationship, typically, demands "several" activities or responses .... these several demands create some strain as between the norms of quantity and quality, technical excellence and human relations, skills and universalism and particularism.

Finally many role relationships are 'role-sets' that is the individual engages by virtual of 'one' of his positions in several role relationships with individuals.[14]

In a joint attempt gross, Mc. Eachern and Mason clarified that any situation in which the incumbent of a position perceives that he is confronted with incompatible expectations will be called a role-conflict.[15]

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[13] W.J. Goode, Op.cit., p.484.
[14] W.J. Goode, Ibid., p.485.
[15] N. Gross et. al. In B.J. Biddle and E.J. Thomas (eds) Role Theory : Concepts and Research Opcit, p-288, Wiley & Sons Inc. New York, 1966, p-288.

A team of researchers Kahn, Wolfe Quinn, Snoek and Rosanthal worked out role-conflict in terms of relationship between role-senders and focal person 'to them', the episode (role-conflict) starts with the existence of a set of role expectations held by role-senders about a focal person and his behaviour depends on the configuration of role pressures actually exerted by role senders on the focal person.[16]

The situation is ambiguous and misleading. One can not draw a line of thinking. According to Parsons' conflicting sets of legitimized role expectations, is to Merton diversification of role Partners in the role-set. Goode holds a psychological motive 'felt difficulty' and Gross believe in any situation of contradiction and incompatible expectations. Finally Kahn et.al. talk of expectations of role-senders and degree of pressures. In such a situation how do we succeed in drawing a precise meaning of role-conflict? The definition given by Abercrombie,[17] Hill and Turner may be utilized. To them role-conflict is used in various ways :

(i)   When a person finds he/she is playing two or more roles at one time that make incompatible demands,

(ii)   When a person defines his/her role in one way while those in related roles define it differently and;

(iii)   When related roles have incompatible expectations of the focal role.

These three "when" may be assumed as situations. Thus, we proposed four criteria and treated them as role-conflict :

(i)   a situation between two contradictory normative behaviour patterns;

(ii)   a situation between prescribed behaviour patterns and perceived behaviour patterns;

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[16] R.L. Kahn, D.M. Wolfe, R.P. Quinn, J.D. Snoek and R.A. Rosenthal, Organizational Stress: Studies in Role-Conflict and Ambiguity, Wiley, New York, 1964, pp-26-34,36.

[17] N. Abercrombie, S. Hill and B.S. Turner, The Penguin, Dictionary of Sociology, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1984, p.182.

(iii)   a situation between behaviour patterns and individual's own inadequacies of managing her/his own time, energy and resources; and

(iv)   a situation between the relationships of members in the role-set. [18]

To conclude, it can be further put forth that these criteria of role-conflict theory have been conceptualized in a broader perspective. To define the situation of role-conflict between two roles, dual roles or contradictory roles explains a dimension of the problem and does not cover all the aspects of the role-conflict. Therefore, a broader perspective was needed . Although, role-conflict theory lays heavy emphasis on the individuals that role-conflict is an individual problem i.e. not adopting a stand point of alters (others, subject, referents etc); or finding it difficult to confirm two contradictory normative behaviour patterns; not coping with the roles due to one's own time, energy and resources, but sources of role-conflict provide enough theoretical inferences that the problem is structural. The societal definition of roles put individuals in the strained situations. The sources of role-conflict also establishes the fact that roles have been wrongly perceived, conceived and interpretected in the social reality. The conflictual situation arises due to malintegration of roles, uncertainty of roles, heavy pressure varied perception of the role-partners in the role-set, the ambivalence of roles, which are incorrigible or wrong in the making of a role. Therefore, as the role itself is a behavioural aspect of the social position. Role-conflict is also manifested by society in the performance of actors or individuals.

Therefore, as long as the traditional definitions of roles in the society and the perception of role-partners continue to exist in the society, the problem of role-conflict cannot be eradicated from our social life.

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[18] N.F. Abidi, Women Physicians: A Study in Roles and Role-conflict, Manak Publication Pvt. Ltd, Delhi, 1993, p-6.

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